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INFO RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY  
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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4945  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2706  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2571  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3189  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0958  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3391  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THREE-DAY PRESIDENTIAL JUNKET IN TURKMENISTAN'S OUTBACK  
SHOWS OFF PROGRESS

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for Internet publication.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the course of a well publicized three day program beginning March 4, President Berdimuhamedov and a procession of government and diplomatic representatives traveled around Mary and Lebap Provinces to attend a military exercise and cut ribbons on new schools, kindergartens, mosques, medical centers and conference facilities. The trip culminated in an Elders' Council session convened in a newly-constructed, palatial conference center in Turkmenabat. French firm Bouygues representatives took the opportunity as well to promote their proposal for car race tracks across the country. The junket appears largely to have been an effort to show the international community -- and the population -- the progress the state has made in its socioeconomic development goals. Steeped in former President Niyazov's tradition of over-promoting presidential benevolence, however, those present at the events could well have concluded that there was more pomp and circumstance than substance to the program. END SUMMARY.

NEW MARY, OLD ARMY

3. (SBU) On March 4, President Berdimuhamedov traveled to Mary city, followed by a charter plane loaded with the diplomatic corps and a bevy of government officials, where he cut the ribbon for a new airport terminal. The Turkish construction company Efor built the \$5 million terminal, which is capable of handling up to 300 passengers an hour. (NOTE: The latest Turkmen Air flight schedule indicates the airport currently handles only two flights a day. END NOTE.) The cortege then traveled by MI-8 helicopter about 250 km south to Chemenabat, very near the Afghan border, a military training area where the Ministry of Defense presented "GUNORTA-2009," a well-choreographed demonstration of Turkmenistan's military fire power. Afterward, the VIPs returned to Mary city, where numerous freshly-completed construction projects were officially commissioned.

MARY APPRECIATION AND PRESIDENTIAL RACING

4. (SBU) In Mary city, Berdimuhamedov inaugurated a modern school

equipped with multimedia technology that will host 600 students. He cut the ribbon on a new maternal care center called Ene Mahri (Mother's Tenderness). During the ceremony, provincial leaders presented an Ahal-Teke horse to the President. Later, the President opened a grandiose, newly-built mosque that can host 2,500 attendees. The local mufti thanked him for building the mosque, which was given the name "Gurbanguly Hajji." (NOTE: "Hajji" is an honorary title for Muslims who have made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Berdimuhamedov performed the Umrah, or non-compulsory "little pilgrimage," shortly after he was inaugurated in 2007. END NOTE.) The next day, Neutralsniy Turkmenistan published a picture of the mosque, in front of which hung a large portrait of Berdimuhamedov wearing a fur hat, with hands raised and cupped in a gesture of supplication.

15. (SBU) The presidential caravan then headed up the re-paved Mary-Turkmenabat highway, to two small dirt race tracks near the highway. French construction company Bouygues' Country Manager, Charles Santer, met the cortege, and showed President Berdimuhamedov a scale model for a proposed international car racing stadium. French race car drivers then demonstrated some racing maneuvers in Mitsubishi Evolution 10 and Renault Clio race cars. After the demonstration, Bouygues representatives gave the Mitsubishi Evolution 10 racing car to Berdimuhamedov. The President took the car for a test drive, racing up the Mary-Turkmenabat highway at speeds approaching -or exceeding- 150mph. Two French drivers reportedly raced along side the President. The "race" ended at the city gate south of Turkmenabat near the Amu-Darya River. Upon arrival into Turkmenabat city, the ribbon cuttings resumed, and Berdimuhamedov officially opened the new Rukhyet (cultural) Palace, where the Elders' Council convened the following day. Fireworks (in

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a light drizzle) followed a concert in the Rukhiyet Palace

RIBBONS AND GIFTS IN TURKMENABAT

16. (SBU) On March 6, the President spoke at the inaugural session of the Council of elders. The forum focused on rural and agricultural sector development, but also touched on the drug problem in Turkmenistan as well as on the negative effect of the global economic crisis on the Turkmen economy - two topics which had pretty much been avoided in local media until Berdimuhamedov's speech. Berdimuhamedov left the council after the opening session and commissioned a new maternity and children's hospital. He then presented 30 new UAZ ambulances to Lebap health care personnel, as "gifts from the President." He also opened a kindergarten and school recently built in the center of the city. New Case Magnum 255 tractors, PAZ buses and UAZ vehicles were then presented as gifts to the province from the President. Finally, the President hosted a sacrificial meal for the scores of government and diplomatic representatives who had accompanied him on this trip, before returning to Ashgabat by helicopter. The rest of the procession then headed back to the capital by charter flight.

17. (SBU) Local staff report that the tradition of publicizing the opening of new facilities, the presentation of needed equipment or vehicles as gifts "on behalf of the President," and the presentation in turn of gifts from local leaders to the President all date from the Niyazov period, and added a bizarre tone to this events. The decision to name the new mosque in Mary "Gurbanguly Hajji" also gave them an eery sense of dj`vu, given the gargantuan mosque in Geok Depe's similar naming of "Saparmurat Hajji."

18. (SBU) COMMENT: This type of junket is typical in Turkmenistan, and the diplomatic corps has become used to being rallied for such events, although they rarely stretch over three days. Steeped in former President Niyazov's tradition of over promoting presidential benevolence, however, these events seemed more about pomp and circumstance than about recognition of worthwhile achievements in social development. END COMMENT.

MILES